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This article attempts to examine a series of events that have taken place in the Polish borderlands over the last decade and which have been directly or indirectly caused by various European or global upheavals (migration crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.), collectively referred to as the polycrisis. In addition to identifying and briefly describing specific phenomena, my aim is to place them into two theoretical categories from the field of border(lands) studies (rebordering and debordering) and three interrelated, more general categories (polycrisis, times of uncertainty and resilience). I conduct my reflections in an institutional order (the internal borders of NATO and the European Union followed by the borders with other neighbours), while pointing to their further internal differentiation. I conclude each section with a summary outlining the specific characteristics of a given borderland block.

Keywords:

Debordering, Polish borderlands, polycrisis, rebordering, resilience, times of uncertainty.

POLISH BORDERLANDS IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY. A HANDFUL OF SOCIO-CULTURAL SCENES AND REFLECTIONS

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Introduction

The expression "times of uncertainty", although it has only recently returned to public discourse, seems to have already gained such a strong position therein that it can easily take on (or perhaps has already taken on?) the form of a hackneyed cliché. However, this appears to be more a sign of the times than of intellectual mediocrity on the part of those who use this category, as these people – in accordance with their mission – strive to document, describe and name specific phenomena, thereby filling this category more fully and constantly with updated, more local content. This is also the aim of this chapter: to recall and present selected facts from the reality of the Polish borderlands in recent years, to place them in the context of specific analytical categories and thus to testify that this region of Europe is also struggling, in its own way, with the challenges of uncertain times.

The structure of this article follows from the above intention. I begin with a brief theoretical reflection on the concepts that are key to me as well as I make an overview of the geographical context of the statements. In the three subsequent sections, which constitute the essence of my considerations, I refer to selected scenes from the Polish borderlands: from those that

form both the EU internal and external borders (in this case, divided into the borderlands with Russia and Belarus and the one with Ukraine), each part additionally accompanied by several more general points that are supposed to direct our attention towards borderlands theoretical reflexivity. I summarise the whole in a way that would fit the illustrations and observations into some more general patterns, more or less applicable to Polish borderlands and neighbouring areas.

A theoretical note and setting the stage

The objective I set for this article stems from two important assumptions. The first relates to the ontology of borderlands, which "are without doubt specific ecological, political and social environments where people and communities have historically had to find their ways to cope with and within the structures of two or more states, as well as their transitions" (Andersen & Prokkola, 2022, p. 5). Currently, after several decades of development in border regions (especially those within the EU), both socially and economically, we are once again entering an era of tightening political control over these areas. And although the situation may vary in different contexts, in the face of crises that have shaped life in Europe, it is precisely the borderlands, as areas 'in between' and specific bridges or barriers, that are the first to experience change. This brings us to the second key assumption concerning borderlands: "It is rarely asked, however, how political borders and strengthened border securitization hinder the vernacular and regional resilience strategies in the face of environmental, economic and socio-cultural change" (ibidem). In this paper, I would like to take a closer look at these processes.

In order to organise my thoughts theoretically, I refer to two categories from the field of border(lands) studies and three more general ones. The first set consists of the widely used but opposing concepts of rebordering and debordering. The former tends to be defined as the process of making state borders less permeable, both literally (physically) and figuratively (in terms of ideas, social relations, etc.), whereas debordering has come to refer to the process of making these borders more permeable, also in both of the aforementioned meanings (e.g. Paasi, 2005; Popescu, 2012). It is worth noting that although the former phenomenon has dominated European border regions in recent years, indicators of the latter can also be found in selected locations, examples of which are also included in this article.

As for the three more general categories, i.e. those outside the scope of border(lands) studies, they are significantly interrelated. Firstly, there is the polycrisis, understood as the simultaneous occurrence of a range of negative phenomena of different nature that reinforce each other, thus leading to even more severe outcomes (one of which being rebordering, if we talk to borderlands specifically) – with the important stipulation that in many parts of the globe, the components of this polycrisis are much more destructive than what we encounter in Europe. Furthermore, adopting the perspective of unprivileged or excluded groups, we can see that for them this phenomenon offers an opportunity to usher in new paradigms of thinking (Ang, 2024), which is also locally present in the context under discussion. The second of the more general categories are the titular times of uncertainty, which I identify, for the purposes of the following considerations, with the years 2014–2025. Over the course of these twelve years, a series of events have taken place in Poland, Europe and globally that have had an impact (sometimes quite an overwhelming one) on the situation in the Polish borderlands – and therefore these events can be described as triggers of polycrisis and uncertainty. Their subjective selection, which will serve as a starting point for more general reflections here, includes:

- the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and its launch of a hybrid war in eastern Ukraine (2014);
- the beginning of the so-called migration challenge in Europe (2015–2016); its effects, although not directly observed in the Polish borderlands, caused a rise in populist sentiments, extreme right-wing emotions and further gradual undermining of the foundations of the European Union (also in a cross-border context);
- suspension of the local border traffic agreement between Poland and the Russian Federation (2016); although this event was of little significance on a pan-European scale (actually, it seems it was

barely noticed), it was nevertheless important and, in its own way, groundbreaking for thinking about the shape of Poland's relations with Russia and for the Polish-Russian neighbourhood (especially the border area);
- the official Brexit (2020), which showed that 'the impossible is possible' after all, reduced the EU's potential in economic and (geo)political terms, and emboldened Eurosceptic circles in other countries, to some extent reconfiguring the shape of public debate;
- the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects (2020–2022), which have been particularly severe for borderlanders;
- migration pressure brought about and maintained by Belarus, which has been affecting (since 2021) primarily Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, and which has influenced, among other things, the type of relations on the eastern borders of the three countries;
- full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine (since 2022), which has caused, among other things, a massive influx of Ukrainian refugees into EU countries, but also certain changes in thinking about the functioning of the Polish-Ukrainian border;
- Donald Trump's return to the US presidency (2025), which led to a review of NATO's operating principles and the Alliance's relationship with the EU;
- the violation of Polish airspace by twenty Russian drones (2025), which can be understood as the most serious action by external forces against a NATO member state to date; this is also part of a broader phenomenon – the hybrid war waged by the Russian Federation against countries (primarily) on NATO's eastern flank.

The third of the more general categories that are key for me, resilience, is also closely related to the other two, as it is an obvious consequence of both crises and times of uncertainty; as such, it has occupied an important place in border(lands) studies analyses (see e.g. the entire volume of studies on this topic: Anderson & Prokkola [eds.], 2022), often in relation to the border areas themselves (cf. borderlands resilience). Essentially, resilience is the ability to overcome a difficult situation and even use it for future benefits by the local community or other people affected by it, using the resources they have at their disposal (Porczyński & Wojakowski, 2020). It is worth remembering that the goals set at one level (e.g. central) do not necessarily coincide with those desired locally (e.g. at the border), if only because of the different value systems in force there (Côte & Nightingale, 2011; Prokkola, 2022).

At the end of this section, with a view to showing the impact of these events on the Polish borderlands, it is worth providing some geographical context for the discussion. Poland borders seven countries: Germany (border length – 467 km), the Czech Republic (790 km), Slovakia (539 km), Ukraine (535 km), Belarus (407 km), Lithuania (103 km) and the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation (210 km). Poland's accession to NATO (1999), the EU (2004) and the Schengen Area (2007) has had a decisive impact on the type of social, political, cultural and economic relations between this state and its neighbours. As a result, it has become customary to divide them into two categories: those with whom Poland shares membership in the aforementioned structures (Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Lithuania) and those outside them (Ukraine, Belarus, Russia) – regardless of further internal, sometimes significant, differences within these two blocks due to historical and contemporary factors. This presentation scheme will also be used below.

Polish borderlands on the internal borders of the EU

In recent years, in addition to expanding and deepening forms of cooperation and blurring the awareness of the existence of national borders, waves of rebordering and debordering have been observed on Poland's borders with other EU member states. The migration crisis, which undermined previous trends on the western European borders, had virtually no impact on Poland's borders with Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Lithuania. This was due to the main migration corridors bypassing this part of Europe – the closest one led through Hungary and Austria to Germany. This does not change the fact that in the eastern

part of the EU, there was an awareness of its insufficient preparation for this challenge, which led to questions (echoing the more heated debate in the western part of the continent) about the effectiveness and sustainability of the Schengen Agreement and, at some localities, to temporary suspension of its operating principles.

Serious restrictions on crossing the border were only introduced here as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is often overlooked that the cross-border lockdown had a particularly severe impact on borderlands – the more integrated the two parts of a given area were, the denser the network of relations between their inhabitants, and the more spheres of life were regulated by cross-border practices, the greater the impact (e.g. Böhm, 2021). Residents of border areas were often faced with choices such as keeping their jobs abroad versus maintaining normal relations with their families. This also led to other inconveniences in everyday life, related to maintaining cross-border social relations, cultivating land located on the other side of the frontier, keeping jobs dependent on visits by foreigners (tourism, trade, services, etc.), or, to put it more generally, practising various forms of cross-border cooperation. Needless to say, the biggest victims of these restrictions were the inhabitants of cities divided by the national border, which had become quite closely knit over the past two decades, especially in terms of everyday life.

In 2021, however, the migration crisis also affected the Polish borderlands, although initially it did not significantly disrupt the functioning of Poland's internal EU borders, leaving its negative mark primarily on the Polish-Belarusian border, where it was concentrated (see below). Over time, however, illegal migration also affected the permeability of the Polish-German and Polish-Lithuanian borders – migrants, whose destination has been Western Europe (especially Germany), also enter the EU and the Schengen Area via the Belarusian-Lithuanian and Belarusian-Latvian borders. In response, in July 2025, Poland introduced temporary controls and additional restrictions on its frontiers with Germany and Lithuania.[1] In the former case, this was a response to similar measures taken by Berlin, but also, to some extent, a reaction to demonstrations by Polish right-wing populist groups organised around the so-called *Border Defence Movement* (Polish: *Ruch Obrony Granic*).

A separate issue is the threat posed by Russia's imperialist policy. It should be viewed not only in the context of the Polish-Russian borderland (discussed below), but also in relation to the so-called Suwałki Gap (the Polish-Lithuanian borderland). It tends to be perceived as a critical strip of land by some experts: approximately 70 km long, crossing Polish territory between the District of Kaliningrad and Belarus, whose occupation by the aggressor would cut off the land route connecting Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia with the rest of NATO and the EU; this gap is considered a potential weak link in the Alliance's eastern flank and, as such, has long been the subject of study by military analysts (Grigas, 2016).[2] The geostrategic importance of the Suwałki region and the media interest this generates mean that the Polish-Lithuanian borderland suffers from an outflow of tourists and investors put off by its proximity to Belarus and Russia.

It is no coincidence that I have not yet mentioned the Polish-Czech and Polish-Slovak borderlands. Indeed, apart from the pandemic restrictions, which were nationwide, it is difficult to point to any serious problems here, which clearly does not mean that these borderlands are free from various types of turbulence. One of them was the conflict concerning the Polish "Turów" mine, which had a negative impact on, among other things, water conditions in the Czech-Polish border region (see Wróblewski, Boháč, Böhm, 2023). In addition, in the cross-border region of Cieszyn Silesia, echoes of a local border conflict from over a hundred years ago can sometimes be heard (Zenderowski, 2021), which resulted in the division of this land between Poland and the then Czechoslovakia. As far as the Polish-Slovak border region is concerned, it is quite significant that one of the few problems there that has had a chance to reach a wider audience in Poland in recent years was the elimination of some bears – animals that migrate, in-

[1] At the time of writing, they were due to remain in force until April 2026.

[2] The same can be said about the Lithuanian part of this borderland, where, moreover, an important railway line connecting Belarus and the Kaliningrad Oblast runs.

cluding across borders – on the Slovak side. Another rather niche topic, which has been present in scientific discourse for a long time, is the poor offer of cross-border public transport, especially at the local or regional level. It should be noted that all these issues are embedded in a given section of the Polish-Czech or Polish-Slovak border and usually resonate at this area only.

To sum up this point, we can say that along the borders connecting Poland with its EU and NATO partners, we can distinguish, on the one hand, the Polish-Czech and Polish-Slovak borderlands, which are relatively little affected by European and global turmoil; apart from the restrictions on crossing borders caused by COVID-19, we note only occasional and short-term difficulties caused by epidemiological threats (which, incidentally, sometimes also affect other borders). On the other hand, we have the Polish-German and Polish-Lithuanian borderlands, facing a more turbulent situation. As mentioned, in all these border areas, the reality of cross-border functioning is more difficult the more deeply integrated the people living on both sides of the border are.

At the same time, interesting phenomena can be observed on a social level. Somewhat paradoxically, with the overcoming of serious disruptions to everyday life, here and there (especially in divided cities) there seems to appear an increased awareness, and the tangible benefits, of living in a shared Schengen space (Böhm, 2022), which, however, should not be taken for granted. For as we know, most people do not tend to treasure what they have until they have lost it. In such cases, one can therefore speak of strengthening of borderland identity, especially that of the so-called borderland man. According to Zbigniew Kurcz's concept (2010, p. 288–289), this manifests itself in the following locally developed conviction: we, borderlanders, tend to lead different lives as regards borders, neighbouring states and foreigners (who more often are simply our acquaintances or neighbours) than our fellow nationals from the interior do.

Looking from an even broader perspective, we can see a deepened – and at the same time ideologically heterogeneous – reflection on the issues of European Union membership, sovereignty as well as the movement of people, capital and... germs (Kajta & Opiłowska, 2023). In the context of pandemic restrictions, voices (not necessarily previously present in the public sphere) have joined the broader debate on the realities of the Polish-German borderland, calling for a stronger role for nation states when it comes to, for example, control over their borders (Renner et al., 2022).

External borders of Poland and the EU: Borderlands with Russia and Belarus

Since the beginning of the systemic changes of the 1990s – and especially since the beginning of this century, when it became clear that the countries of Central Europe would join Western European structures – Poland's eastern borderlands have developed in a completely different way than the four intra-EU borderlands discussed above. In the context that is of interest to us, this means that the borderlands with Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, offering much less, also had much less to lose. However, since at least 2014, with Russia's annexation of Crimea and its provocation of war in eastern Ukraine, the latter country has more decisively distanced itself from Poland's other two non-EU neighbours – a situation that continues today, yet on an even larger scale.[3] Therefore, in this section, I will focus solely on the borderlands with Belarus and Russia, which have experienced almost exclusively rebordering processes over the past decade, and the Polish-Ukrainian borderland, where the situation is much more diverse, will be moved to the next section of the article.

[3] Without getting too deeply into history, it is worth mentioning that these two separate paths had already become apparent in 2003, when Poland, preparing for EU accession, introduced visa requirement for citizens of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, among others. In retaliation, Russia and Belarus took similar steps, while Ukraine maintained visa-free travel regime for Polish citizens. What is more, since 1991, when the three independent states were established, only Ukraine has been able to ensure (albeit sometimes not without serious problems) a democratic method of electing its authorities (in the other two countries, these were only shorter or longer episodes). These circumstances do not change the fact that the collective term "eastern borderlands" tends to be used to describe all three Polish borderlands with non-EU countries, regardless of the fact that Poland borders Russia to the north and its north-eastern neighbour is Lithuania, a partner in NATO, the EU and the Schengen area.

As mentioned, restrictions on the free movement of people, triggered by the migration crisis of 2015, did not affect the areas discussed here. However, the following year, as a result of a complex internal situation and with the growing threat from Moscow in the background, Poland suspended its agreement with Russia on local border traffic, which had significantly revitalised the shared border region socially and economically during its four years of operation (Studzińska 2024). Left to its own devices, plagued by the problems typical of the EU's periphery, the region fell into even greater difficulties; these were exacerbated with the onset of the pandemic and subsequent introduction of further restrictions, and then with Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Observations from one of the border towns leave no room for doubt as to what life is like in this area today: "The absence of Russian tourists has had a devastating economic impact on this region, one of the poorest in Poland. Many residents struggle to make ends meet, having been heavily dependent on trade and cross-border connections with Russia" (Stokłosa, 2025, p. 147).

As a result, at the end of 2025, there are only two road border crossings between Poland and the District of Kaliningrad, where, according to Border Guard data, traffic is significantly lower than a decade ago. At the same time, the security of this frontier is being strengthened as part of 'the Eastern Shield' project, young residents of the region are looking for better living conditions in the centre of the country or abroad, and the lack of prospects for those who have remained in the border area is becoming increasingly apparent. All of the above-mentioned activities represent a clear regression in terms of the social conditions of the area in question, whose relatively normal cross-border development only gradually took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Studzińska 2024). Previously, since the establishment of this border after World War II, no social relations were maintained here, as the District was a military area, closed not only for foreigners, but also for regular citizens of the USSR.

The border with Belarus functioned somewhat differently at that time, but also within the restrictions of the Schengen Area. Although the authorities of that country traditionally viewed Poland and the developing cross-border practices suspiciously, the specific social conditions of this borderland – which connects not only business people and institutions, but above all families and acquaintances – made it possible after 1991 to recreate, develop and maintain intensive networks and interpersonal relations in this area. It was also spared the restrictions of 2015, and serious limitations only came into force here in connection with the pandemic, which, incidentally, put an end to the border crossing facilitations introduced by Belarus in previous years. The real crisis began in the summer of 2021, when refugees brought in for this purpose by President Lukashenko's regime (with at least the tacit consent of the Russian authorities) began storming the Polish-Belarusian border. This prompted the Warsaw authorities to erect a fence along a large part of the border and to close some of the border crossings. Later on, bilateral relations became even more tense. Minsk supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and at the Polish-Belarusian frontier, the aforementioned refugees started to be pushed by the regime into increasingly drastic behaviour. The borderland has become the scene of difficult, sometimes dramatic events, as many migrants have paid with their lives for attempting to cross the border.[4] In 2025, the situation began to gradually stabilise, but it is difficult to predict how events will unfold even in the nearest future.

At the same time, this four-year-long situation has significantly changed the character of the Polish-Belarusian borderland, where the previously reported cross-border practices have almost ceased. At the height of the crisis, only one passenger and one freight checkpoint was operational along the entire border (over 400 km long). Two others were restored in November 2025, but local entrepreneurs live now in uncertainty because, given the unstable bilateral relations, it is unclear how long these

[4] The cause of well over a hundred deaths (there are no exact figures) was mainly difficult terrain and weather conditions, inappropriate actions by Polish services, restrictions imposed by Polish authorities on providing assistance to those in need, and risky actions taken by migrants, often due to pressure exerted on them on the Belarusian side of the border. This also resulted in a growing threat to the health and lives of Polish officers, as well as one case of a refugee murdering a Polish border guard.

crossings will remain open. Moreover, many businesses have gone bankrupt in the last few years, and those that have survived will find it difficult to return to their previous operating conditions (Kołodziejczyk, 2025). All this has had serious social and economic consequences: lack of interest from investors and tourists, collapse of cross-border trade and small businesses, disrupted family and social networks, depopulation. An area once rightly identified with a specific socio-cultural atmosphere, a cross-border mosaic of languages and religious denominations, original Eastern cuisine and outstanding natural assets, is now commonly associated with the refugee crisis. This change is reflected in the literature on the subject: for several years now, reports and academic works focusing on this area have not concerned much Polish-Belarusian cross-border relations or the borderland as such, but primarily this broadly understood crisis. Importantly, the entire migration challenge essentially abstracts from the interethnic content specific to this borderland – to such an extent that now its role has been boiled down to geopolitically separating the EU and NATO, on the one hand, and Belarus, Russia as well as those subjects which have been used by these states in an instrumental manner.

As I have tried to show it, the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Russian borderlands are areas that have been particularly affected by various crises in recent years – related to the pandemic, and even more so with artificially induced migration pressure from African and Asian countries, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (in which Belarus supported the aggressor), and the previously signalled uncertainty about the fate of the area connecting both borderlands (the Suwałki Gap). The latter two phenomena are particularly relevant in the context of Donald Trump's re-election as President of the United States – a man who works to weaken the European Union and undermines the cohesion and credibility of the North Atlantic Alliance, most of all its Eastern flank. And even if some media reports on these issues are somewhat exaggerated, the Polish borderlands with Belarus, Russia (and also Lithuania), the institutions and inhabitants there can still be viewed in the context of expectations regarding defence tasks (Laine & Petersson, 2025, p. 4–5). This, in turn, brings to mind associations with the past, reinforcing the aforementioned figure of the borderland man, who is the first one, and on a unique scale, to face particular challenges (Kurcz 2010).

External borders of Poland and the EU (borderland with Ukraine)

As mentioned above, for a long time now, the Polish-Ukrainian borderland and neighbourhood have remained distinct in many respects from the Polish borderlands with Belarus and Russia. In the last decade, these differences have become much more pronounced, with the result that in the Ukrainian context we can talk not only about rebordering, but also about debordering. The former, it should be noted, is primarily reflected in the still insufficient number of Polish-Ukrainian border crossings and their inadequate capacity (Jaroszewicz & Mrozek, 2020) or the suspension (since the pandemic) of local cross-border events in many localities; one of such enterprises was the so-called European Neighbourhood Days, during which it was possible to cross the border in places where there is normally no border crossing. Much more can be said about debordering, however.

When it comes to decision-making, it is important to mention Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas as catalysts for a change in narrative; since then, European discourse has imagined Ukraine as a victim that requires support from the European Union (Bürkner, 2017, 2020). This fact contributed to the EU's decision in 2017 to abolish visas for Ukrainian citizens entering the Schengen Area. In mid-2022, just a few months after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the European Council granted Ukraine the status of an EU candidate country, which was a sign of support for the initiatives undertaken and a good prognosis for the future.

When it comes to specific, tangible measures, three border crossing facilitations are particularly worth mentioning here (Dębicki 2025a). Firstly, since the end of 2016, more passenger trains have been running between Poland and Ukraine, which has increased the permeability of the (generally low-capacity) common border. Suffice it to say that over the course of a decade, the number of

these connections has increased from two to eleven pairs per day, which is undoubtedly impressive, even if it is mainly due to a particularly low starting point. Secondly, during the most intense wave of refugees from war-torn Ukraine, Poland simplified the procedures for crossing the common border and opened additional checkpoints (including for pedestrians). Although this was only a temporary measure, it could raise questions as to why it cannot be permanent, as is the case at other external EU borders. Thirdly, in recent years, investments have been made (some of which have already been completed) in the development of cross-border corridors (mainly rail), and plans for the future are also promising in this respect. It is worth noting that in two places where the aforementioned European Neighbourhood Days were organised before the pandemic, the event is currently continuing despite the war.

This debordering was also evident on a social level and in the realm of ideas and imaginaries, manifesting itself in the support that refugees received in Poland, including on the border itself. This assistance was seen as another dimension of neighbourliness as a result of cultural resilience: the transformation of the "multiculturalism industry", i.e. the marketing exploitation of the multi-ethnic past of the borderland, into a certain cultural flexibility, as well as the interpenetration of institutional and private cooperation (Wojakowski 2025, pp. 171–172, 185). This change is particularly significant not only in the context of negative experiences that left their mark on bilateral relations in the past, especially in the border region, but also due to the relatively low level of interest that Ukrainian neighbours or Ukraine in general enjoyed in the Polish part of the border region in the years preceding the Russian military escalation (Dębicki 2025b). It should be added that currently, attitudes towards migrants in the border region are (much) less open, which corresponds to the patterns observed throughout Poland.

All these circumstances allow us to conclude that on the Polish-Ukrainian border – in contrast not only to the Polish-Russian and Polish-Belarusian borders, but also to Western European borders – the aforementioned elements of polycrisis have translated into not only rebordering but also debordering. It goes without saying that any manifestation of the latter process is particularly valuable in the current situation, as it allows us to speak of a unique form of borderland resilience: not only of the bouncing-back type, expressed in attempts to overcome difficulties and return to the previous state of affairs, but also of the bouncing-forward type, which essentially involves transforming the crisis into further stages of development (cf. Balogh & Svensson, 2022; Laine 2022).

To sum up the reflections on Poland's borderlands with its three non-EU neighbours, it should be emphasised that over the last decade, the tendency towards internal differentiation within this group, usually referred to simply as the post-Soviet bloc, has become more pronounced. While Russia and Belarus are sinking into dictatorial practices that also affect their neighbours, Ukraine, which has been particularly hard hit, is laboriously forging its future within a group of cooperating democratic states. These divergences have an impact on the type of cross-border relations between Poland and these countries. While the borders with Belarus and Russia have become lines separating increasingly different worlds and hostile camps, and the borderlands there are associated with arenas of escalating confrontation and isolation, the Polish-Ukrainian border, although it currently separates a zone of peace from a zone of war, still functioning in accordance with the regulations applicable to the EU's external borders, is gradually being incorporated into the process of modernisation and Europeanisation, resulting in greater permeability.

In this context, it is also worth mentioning the distinction between a social borderland, characterised by a relatively extensive network of cross-border interactions, and an administrative borderland, which is essentially based on a border that separates people, countries or cultures and hindering the development of cross-border practices (Kurcz, 2017, p. 59). So, while the Polish borderlands with Russia and Belarus are increasingly shifting towards the administrative variant, with a very strong security component, the Polish-Ukrainian borderland is developing in the opposite direction. Even if it should be noted that this process is slow and irregular, and its contours are most clearly visible against the background of the two abovementioned cases, this observation still seems

more optimistic than the search for a new idea for the development of the Polish-Russian borderland which would most likely be based on the belief that it is difficult to expect positive impulses from Russia and the Polish-Russian border (Studzińska, 2024, p. 744).

By the way, delving deeper into the issue of internal differences, it is worth noting that while the threat posed by Russia is well recognised, and reflections on this topic appear in the literature on the subject, the Polish-Belarusian borderland (but also the Lithuanian- and Latvian-Belarusian borderlands) tend to be overlooked in this context (Laine & Petersson, 2025, p. 2). The multidimensional format of military cooperation between Belarus and Russia, however, should leave no illusions here, and not only in the context of the sensitive Suwałki Gap.

Summary

The pandemic, the migration crisis, the aggressive stance of Russia and its ally Belarus, and the inauguration of an unpredictable US president – these are the most crucial events with European and even global implications, which are taking shape locally in ways specific to each borderland and neighbourhood. And although neither the first nor the second set isolated above constitute a monolith, in the eastern borderlands we are facing rather borderlines, while in the internal Schengen ones we are dealing rather with borderscapes (Brambilla, 2015). At the same time, certain opportunities are opening up in some of the areas discussed, although these too are fraught with a considerable degree of uncertainty.

Interestingly, the borderland where we observe not only negative but also positive phenomena is the one that currently separates the zone of peace from the zone of war, where good practices and optimism should therefore be hardest to identify. The above-mentioned examples of debordering at the Polish-Ukrainian border, although few in number, confirm the thesis that a polycrisis can be an opportunity to improve the situation of those who have hitherto been largely disadvantaged. In other words, this is a manifestation of resilience – in this case, borderland resilience – which means emerging from the crisis stronger.

Speaking of times of uncertainty, it is reasonable to assume that we are currently seeing only part of these phenomena and that further turmoil is to be expected. Our times are marked by dynamism and change, which primarily affect borderlands and demand an appropriate, resilient response that can lead to more serious transformation. As Jussi Laine (2022) put it: "A resilient world is a world of becoming".

A decade ago, when reaching the place where the borders of Poland, Lithuania and Russia meet, it was possible (albeit illegally) to enter the part of the space around the obelisk marking that point, which belongs to Russia. A few years later, this area was separated from the Polish and Lithuanian sides by barriers, and now the entire area around the tripoint is surrounded by barbed wire. Reaching the peak where the borders of Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine meet (Polish: Krzemieniec, Slovak: Kremenec, Ukrainian: Кременець), we see a small open clearing and a symbolic monument, around which tourists stroll carefree (albeit illegally), and the trampled ground testifies that this is not an exceptional situation. Both scenes, concerning the same political arrangement – the tripoint of two EU member states and one non-member state – do not, of course, change the regulations on crossing the EU's external borders in any way, as these pictures are symbolic in nature. However, as we know, symbols also have meaning.

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